MJ GONZALES: DANIEL NEGREANU’S COACH SEEKS OUT HEADS-UP ACTION OF HIS OWN

High-Stakes Pro Talks Upcoming $3M Freezeout, Private Games, And New Coaching Platform

ANKUSH MANDAVIA TALKS ABOUT TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO LIVE TOURNAMENT CIRCUIT

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Michael Addamo Wins WPT World Online Championships

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HIGH-STAKES POKER PRO KAHLE BURNS TRAVELS THE WORLD LOOKING FOR ACTION

31-Year-Old High Roller Near The Top Of Australia’s All-Time Money List

New Jersey Sets Record For Online Gaming Revenue

Life Variance And What To Do During A Pandemic

Making The Best Deal

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RIO ALL-SUITE HOTEL & CASINO TO BE REBRANDED INTO HYATT HOTEL

By Steve Schult

The home of the World Series of Poker will soon become a Hyatt-branded hotel.

Hyatt Hotels Corporation announced in late March that it had entered into a franchise agreement with Dreamscape Companies LLC, the owner of the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino, according to a report from a local Fox affiliate.

The new operator will renovate the former Caesars Entertainment property, which opened in 1990, and turn it into multiple Hyatt hotel towers. The announcement did not give a timeline for the renovation and it is not clear whether the property will still operate a gaming floor when the renovation is completed.

“We are thrilled that Dreamscape will help us bring multiple Hyatt full-service brands to Las Vegas, starting with a Hyatt Regency hotel, which we believe will deliver on the Hyatt Regency brand promise of creating meaningful connections in modern spaces designed for sharing, socializing, and collaborating,” said Hyatt’s Vice President of real estate and development Kimo Bertram in a statement.

In September 2019, Caesars announced that it sold the property for $516 million to Dreamscape, a group controlled by New York-based real estate group Imperial Companies. As part of the agreement, Caesars agreed to continue to run the casino and pay $45 million in rent for two years, with an option for a $7 million rent payment in the third year.

The deal was finalized in December 2019, which leaves between nine and 21 months left before Caesars completely severs ties with the property.

Given that there was no timeline on the rebranding and renovation process, a likely scenario is one where it doesn’t happen until Caesars no longer operates the facility and it could be transformed solely into a near-Strip hotel.

That would allow Caesars to run the WSOP at the Rio Convention Center for another few years until the company finds a new destination for the world’s largest poker series.

There have been rumors of the WSOP moving away from the Rio for quite some time. Most of the speculation surrounding the possible move away from its home since 2005 had it going to the recently finished Caesars Forum Conference Center.

The $300 million, 550,000-square foot building is one of the few buildings owned by Caesars capable of housing the series. It has 300,000 square feet of meeting space and is located on the Las Vegas Strip behind the Linq. By comparison, the Rio’s convention center is 160,000 square feet.

When Caesars sold the property, Seth Palansky, former Vice President of Corporate Communications for the WSOP, told Card Player that the series would be held at the Rio in 2020 and that “people should feel confident that the 2021 WSOP will be at the Rio as well.”

The 2020 WSOP was hosted online due to the pandemic and there has been no announcement about the status of the 2021 series yet. 🎨
The Inside Straight

Enrollment Spikes at Las Vegas Dealer Schools

By Steve Schult

The more people that are comfortable being inside a casino, the quicker the brick-and-mortar casino industry will recover to pre-pandemic levels.

That seems to be the case, at least on one side of the table, as there is an increased number of applicants to dealer schools in Las Vegas. According to a report from a local Fox affiliate, a handful of dealer schools have actually hit the maximum number of students they are allowed to accept.

David Noll, owner of CEG Dealer School, told local reporters that he had to limit enrollment to the course on several occasions. He also said that many of the applicants were considered “back of house” employees that were looking to transition to a different sector of the casino industry.

Those positions include employees of nightclubs or live performances, which still don’t have a concrete timetable as to when things will go back to normal.

As for the gambling aspect of the casino market, governments around the country have steadily been easing restrictions on table games. Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak announced in February that Silver State casinos could operate at 35% capacity, which was up from the 25% that was allowed when the market reopened last summer. Governors in New Jersey and Pennsylvania have made similar decisions within the last few weeks.

That number was raised to 50% in March and several major media outlets have reported that the city has seen a severe spike in tourism since the increase.

The return of tourists to Las Vegas should cause a spike in gaming revenue. In Nevada, casinos have experienced 11 straight months with year-over-year declines in gambling earnings.

Both Connecticut Tribes Agree to Online Gambling and Sports Betting Deal

By Steve Schult

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont came to an agreement with one of the two major tribes at the start of March regarding sports betting and online gambling.

In the following weeks, the other has agreed to terms and now both the Mohegan Tribe and the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation are on board with a deal that will likely bring expanded gambling to the state within a few months.

The agreement will allow the Connecticut Lottery, as well as both tribal entities, to run sports betting, according to a report from local media. The Mohegan Tribe agreed to terms in early March before continued negotiations were able to get the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe to accept terms.

As part of the agreement, the government will tax all online casino gaming, which should include online poker, at 18% for the first five years of the market before it increases to 20% for the following five years.

Sports betting revenue, however, will be taxed at 13.75%, and the Connecticut Lottery will have the right to operate 15 retail locations and one online sportsbook. Two of the retail locations will be in Hartford and Bridgeport.

The tribes also agreed to pause the construction of the proposed casino in East Windsor for the next decade. They already own the two casinos in the state, Mohegan Sun, and Foxwoods, and were partnering up for the third property.

“Connecticut is on cusp of providing a modern, technologically advanced gaming experience for our residents, which will be competitive with our neighboring states,” said Lamont in a press conference. “It’s something all our neighbors are doing, something to bring cities and towns back to life.”

Mashantucket Pequot Chairman Rodney Butler told a local reporter that he expects the agreement to get through the legislature in the next month and get approval from regulators in the following months. Butler expects that the state will have online gambling and sports betting by the end of summer.

Once the legislature approves the deal, the current gaming compact would need to be rewritten to reflect the new agreement and the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs would need to sign off on the agreement as well before the market can be launched.

With the recent ruling on the Wire Act, which allows for interstate online poker, Connecticut would be able to pair up with other states for shared liquidity if it chooses to.
Michigan’s second online poker platform launched at the end of March as BetMGM entered the market under the partypoker US network.

The move comes almost two months after PokerStars became the first company to launch online poker in the newly legalized market.

“The launch of BetMGM Poker in Michigan fully rounds out our premier gaming portfolio in the state,” said BetMGM CEO Adam Greenblatt in a press release. “BetMGM’s sports betting and casino offerings have been met with incredible early success in Michigan and we’re thrilled to provide players with another exciting gaming option.”

In January, BetMGM launched online sports betting and casino games after the state regulators finalized rules and allowed companies to launch online gambling platforms. In Michigan, online providers need to have a land-based partner, which BetMGM has with the MGM Grand Detroit property.

Michigan becomes the second market the company offers online poker in. It has been a fixture in New Jersey under the same partypoker US operation thanks to the MGM’s acquisition of the Borgata in 2016.

There are no interstate gambling compacts in place yet with the Michigan market, but given that Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed legislation in early January that would allow the practice to take place, and after the industry got a favorable ruling on the Wire act, one will likely form soon.

Both PokerStars and BetMGM have New Jersey platforms, making a New Jersey-Michigan shared online poker liquidity pool a likely scenario.

Gross gaming revenue in the Garden State remained flat year-over-year in February as operators reported winning a combined $288.3 million from the state's gamblers, according to numbers reported by the Division of Gaming Enforcement.

Those figures are nearly identical to the $287.3 million operators won in February 2020, up just 0.3%. Once again, it was internet gaming revenue that paced the market with $93.8 million in revenue. Online numbers were up 80.4% compared to the $52 million won from gamblers a year earlier.

In January, online gambling made up one-third of total gaming revenue as the state saw a 15.3% increase year-over-year.

Sports betting revenue was up a whopping 171.8% year-over-year as books won $46.2 million. Sportsbooks earned that sum after handling $742.9 million in sports bets, which was good for a 6% hold rate. Even in the sports gambling world, online has taken over with $689.2 million of the total handle wagered through an online or mobile platform. Year-to-date, gamblers have bet $1.7 billion on sporting events with $1.575 billion of that coming online.

DraftKings was the most successful sportsbook in New Jersey with a $27.2 million in revenue. The company has a brick-and-mortar sportsbook at the Meadowlands Racetrack but does most of its business online.

Despite the Super Bowl taking place in February, there was a sizable dip in the sports betting handle from the prior month. In January, the total amount of sports bets accepted in New Jersey nearly eclipsed the $1 billion mark. February's handle was down $253 million from the first month of 2021.

Atlantic City’s brick-and-mortar market continued to struggle in a post-COVID-19 world as live casino revenue was down 32.1% with the nine casinos combining to win $148.2 million.

Borgata was once again the highest-grossing casino in the state with $36.95 million in revenue. It held the top spot, but those numbers represented a 35.8% drop from its numbers a year ago. Every other casino in the city also posted a year-over-year decline. Those numbers could start seeing an uptick soon as Gov. Phil Murphy announced a relaxing of COVID-19-induced restrictions last week.

Golden Nugget saw the biggest percentage drop with $8.8 million in revenue, good for a 45.6% dip in casino revenue. Hard Rock Atlantic City was the closest property to record an increase with just a 1.7% fall from last year with $23.6 million.

However, Golden Nugget Online Gaming, a spin-off from Tilman Fertitta’s brick-and-mortar enterprise, was the most successful online casino in the state with $27.9 million. It edged out Borgata’s virtual platform, which pulled in $25.7 million.

Through the first two months of the year, total gaming revenue is up $634.4 million compared to $587.8 million in 2020. The difference comes from the breakdown of that revenue with live casino revenue down 24.8% and internet gaming revenue up 84.5% over the same timeframe.
GAMBLING EXPANSION BILLS FILED IN TEXAS LEGISLATURE
By Steve Schult

A pair of bills have been filed in the Texas legislature that would bring four casinos in major metropolitan areas to the state, as well as sports betting.

According to a report from the Dallas Morning News, the proposed legislation has bipartisan support with Republican Rep. John Kuempel submitting HJR 133 in the House and Democrat Sen. Carol Alvarado authoring SJR 49, the Senate's version of the bill. It would also allow the three federally recognized tribal nations in the state to run gambling operations as well.

The bills would overturn the gambling ban in the state constitution. Since the legislation deals with a constitutional amendment, it requires a two-thirds majority vote from the legislators.

In a statement, Alvarado used the same argument that other gambling expansion advocates have used. That the money should stay in the state instead of allowing gamblers to cross borders and generate economic activity elsewhere.

“Texas loses billions of dollars a year to our neighboring states that allow gaming, and this measure would bring that revenue back to Texas, create tens of thousands of jobs and cut down on illegal gambling,” said Alvarado.

Both Oklahoma and Louisiana have casinos near the border with Texas. At the major poker tournament series at Choctaw Casino, a tribal casino in Oklahoma located about 15 miles from the Texas border, a large portion of the player pool hails from Texas, specifically the Dallas area.

The legislation follows lobbying work done by Las Vegas Sands Corp., now known as Sands Corp after the company sold its pair of Las Vegas Strip properties. Last November, Sheldon Adelson hired eight lobbyists to push for gambling legalization in the state. Adelson passed away last January, but the efforts continued under new leadership.

At a briefing about the legislation last month, a Sands representative said the company would be focusing most of its efforts on the Dallas market.

It won't be smooth sailing towards legalization as there are still some government officials who do not want to see the state expand its gambling market. Last month, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said that gambling “wouldn’t see the light of day” during the current legislative session.
The Inside Straight - Player of the Year

2021 Card Player Player of the Year
Sponsored by Global Poker

South Korea’s Sung Joo Hyun emerged victorious in the 2021 Wynn Spring Classic $3,500 buy-in no-limit hold’em championship event, earning $323,409 and his second big title of the year. Hyun had come out on top in the WPT DeepStacks Venetian $1,600 buy-in event just six weeks earlier for $208,335. The two scores are the largest of his career, collectively making up the majority of his $1,033,602 in lifetime earnings.

Hyun had won his first World Series of Poker gold bracelet during the 2020 WSOP Online series last summer, overcoming a field of 2,307 entries to win the $500 buy-in event for $161,898.

The recent victory for Hyun at the Wynn saw him earn 1,260 Card Player Player of the Year points. When combined with the 912 points he was awarded at Venetian in February, Hyun now sits in second place in the 2021 POY race standings with 2,172 total points and $531,744 in year-to-date earnings. That puts him 899 points behind current leader Qing Liu, who coincidentally finished 11th ($32,815) in this event for his ninth cash of the year.

The event attracted 614 entries to build a prize pool of $1,985,676, nearly doubling the tournament’s $1 million guarantee. The strong turnout resulted in big paydays and large amounts of POY points awarded at the final table. Runner-up finisher Matthias Auer cashed for $323,408 and 1,050 POY points after striking a heads-up deal with Hyun. This score alone was enough to see the Austrian surge up the leaderboard and into 14th place in the rankings. Third-place finisher Will Failla secured $173,240 and 840 points. This was Failla’s second final table of the year, and with 1,180 points and $209,668 in cashes so far, he now sits in 10th place in the POY race standings.

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JOE MCKEEHEN CAPTURES WYNN SPRING CLASSIC HIGH ROLLER TITLE TO MAINTAIN HIS HOLD ON THIRD PLACE

Just two days after Joe McKeehen finished as the runner-up in the WPT Venetian $5,000 buy-in main event for $491,960, the 29-year-old poker pro from North Wales, Pennsylvania once again made it down to heads-up play in a big live tournament. The three-time WSOP bracelet winner and 2015 world champion navigated his way through a field of 83 entries and ultimately came out on top in the Wynn Spring Classic $10,500 buy-in no-limit hold’em high roller event, beating Shawn Daniels heads-up to secure the title, the $224,100 top prize, and 480 POY points.

McKeehen had earned 1,520 points for his runner-up showing days earlier, bringing his point total to 2,000 for the time being. As a result, he strengthened his grip on the third-place spot on the 2021 POY leaderboard.

These back-to-back scores saw McKeehen increase his lifetime tournament earnings to more than $17.7 million. He has been one of the most successful WSOP main event winners of the modern era. For a closer look at how he stacks up against the other world champions, check out this issue’s Poker Leaderboard on pg. 38.

VLAD DARIE WINS $1,100 DEEPSTACK SHOWDOWN EVENT TO JOIN THE TOP 20

Romania’s Vlad Darie made a pair of final tables in $1,100 buy-in no-limit hold’em events during the Venetian DeepStack Showdown series that ran during the month of March. Darie started things off with a deep run in the ‘MonsterStack’ event held on March 7. He navigated his way through the field of 311 entries to ultimately finish in eighth place, earning $8,145 and 80 points for his efforts.

Just three days later, Darie defeated a field of 809 entries in the ‘UltimateStack’ event to secure the top prize of $159,711 and 912 points. This was the fourth-largest tournament cash of his career, and it brought his lifetime earnings to $1,966,600.

These two cashes were enough to catapult the 2016 WPT Vienna champion into 16th place in the POY rankings, with 992 total points and $167,856. Keith Morrow finished second in the ‘UltimateStack’ event for $102,837 and 760 points. With one previous final-table finish under his belt, Morrow now sits in 28th place in the overall standings.

Sergio Aido made moves in the POY standings. The Spanish high-stakes tournament standout placed fourth for $53,000 and 150 points. Aido has made three final tables, accumulating 846 points and $256,140 in year-to-date earnings. As a result, he now sits in 38th place in the standings.

The ARIA Poker Room played host to several high-stakes poker tournaments, with more than $2.4 million in total prize money paid out across four events held from March 7-10. These were the latest in a series of recurring monthly high-roller no-limit hold’em tournaments at the venue.

The first three events on the schedule featured a $10,500 buy-in. The kickoff event saw Sergi Reixach defeat a field of 32 entries to earn $108,120 and 240 points. The second event drew 39 entries, with bracelet winner Barry Hutter securing $140,400 and 240 points as the champion.

The third event saw 53 entries made, with four-time WPT main event winner Darren Elias taking home $169,600 and 300 points for the win after defeating Joseph Cheong heads-up (2nd - $111,300). Ali Imsirovic finished third for $74,200 and 200 points. This was his fourth POY-qualified final table, with two titles won along the way. He now sits in 38th place in the standings.

Sergio Aido also made moves in the POY standings. The Spanish high-stakes tournament standout placed fourth for $53,000 and 150 points. Aido has made three final tables, accumulating 846 points and $256,140 in year-to-date earnings. As a result, he now sits in 23rd place in the rankings.

The fourth and final event of this short high roller series was a $25,000 buy-in tournament. The 48-entry turnout built a $1,200,000 prize pool, with Sean Winter earning $408,000 and 420 points as the eventual champion.
Canadian poker player and Twitch streamer Vanessa Kade capped off a roller coaster few months with a victory in the 15th anniversary of the PokerStars Sunday Million in March.

Over the course of three days of play, the recent addition to the Americas Cardroom team of pros bested a massive field of 67,876 entries to win more than $1.5 million, by far the largest score her career. There were 45,765 unique entries in the $215 buy-in no-limit hold’em event.

Kade defeated Pawel “Talibenes” Ladniak heads-up to secure the title and earn $1,514,920. The Polish player earned $1,035,358 for his runner-up finish.

“It feels impossible,” Kade wrote on social media. “This is the best day of my life. It’s not close. All the pain was worth it, the dream is real.”

Kade’s life-changing win comes a tumultuous few months after online poker site GGPoker’s addition of self-proclaimed ‘King of Instagram’ Dan Bilzerian to their roster of sponsored pros last December.

Kade has been outspoken in her displeasure of the signing, citing Bilzerian’s questionable and sometimes criminal history with women. Bilzerian was sued in 2014 for $1 million by a model after an alleged brawl in a Miami nightclub, and later dealt with legal issues after he threw porn actress Janice Griffith off the roof of a house and into a pool.

The criticism prompted Bilzerian to respond to one of her tweets with, “Quiet hoe [sic], nobody knows who you are.”

Bilzerian’s comment drew ire from many in the poker community, but the situation ultimately died down until March when Kade revealed that GGPoker had discontinued her affiliate account with the site. Previously, Kade had been able to earn a percentage of the rake generated by players she referred to the site.
The cancellation of her affiliate account for “on-going actions over three months” was considered by some in the poker community to be retaliation against Kade for her comments, and reignited discussions about whether Bilzerian is the right person to be the face of a poker site. A GGPoker statement acknowledged Bilzerian’s “derogatory remark,” and then ironically said that they “cannot control everything our ambassadors say on their personal social media.”

“It says something when the only time [terminating an affiliate contract] has been exercised as punishment is in a case where valid concerns about misogyny have been brought up and ignored,” Kade said.

Meanwhile, it’s unclear why GGPoker has decided to stick by Bilzerian. His insult of Kade remains the only tweet the 39-year-old has made about the online poker site since his signing. His Instagram page is also lacking any mentions among the not-safe-for-work photos of naked models, although GGPoker does feature his caricature on their homepage alongside fellow team pros Daniel Negreanu, Fedor Holz, and Bertrand ‘ElkY’ Grospellier.

A little more than a week after losing her deal with GGPoker, Americas Cardroom announced that the site would be signing Kade to a sponsorship deal of their own. The company already beefed up its roster of pros with the signing of 2003 World Series of Poker main event champion Chris Moneymaker in February, and is also represented by other popular streamers such as Jon Van Fleet, Jeff Boski, Ryan Depaulo, and Ebony Kenney.

With a new online site in her corner, Kade entered the Sunday Million. She survived the first two days and with 65 players heading into Tuesday’s third and final day, Kade was 13th in chips.

When asked if she had considered selling any of her action to lock up a sizable score, Kade opted against it. “[I] have 100% of myself, and I’m keeping it. [I] wanna feel the rush, baby!”

The former video game producer chipped up throughout the first several levels and started the final table seventh in chips. After “Vvlankov” busted in ninth place and “kefirchik106” fell right behind him, Kade was officially the short stack at the table.

She got a much-needed double up seven-handed when she shoved her last six blinds from the hijack with J♦ 8♥ and spiked an eight on the flop against her opponent’s A♠ 9♥. After winning a few more pots without showdown, she quickly found herself back near the top of the leaderboard.

Kade eliminated “malinga” in sixth place when her A♣ Q♦ held up against his A♠ 7♣, moving her closer to Ladniak who held an overwhelming chip lead. “peu3ep” was eliminated in fifth, and then Kade scored a massive double up four-handed through the chip leader that changed the course of the tournament.

She got all in preflop with pocket kings against Ladniak’s A♦ 10♥ and ended up making a set. She took over the chip lead for good a short while later when she picked off a river bluff with two pair against a busted flush and straight draw.

“Panchovetin” hit the rail in third for $707,640, which gave Kade more than a 6:1 chip lead at the outset of heads-up play, which lasted just a few hands. On the final hand, she won a race with pocket eights against K♥ 9♦ to finish off the tournament and secure her victory.

### Final Table Results

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HEAD GAMES

Position And Having The Lead In Tournament Play

By Craig Tapscott

The Pros: Faraz Jaka, Nick Petrangelo, and David Baker

Craig Tapscott: Can you share how you take advantage of position in tournaments?

Faraz Jaka: Having position is one of the most important things in poker, because it gives you such a big edge. Over the long run, at any given poker table, you will generally make most of your money off the player directly to your right and lose the most money to the player to your left.

One reason why having position gives you an advantage is that the player with position gets far greater control of dictating the final size of the pot. If you had the same hand out of position, the player in position may force you to pay more to get to showdown.

It also just makes it way easier to get max value when you hit a big hand. Imagine someone raises from early position, you call in middle position with pocket threes, the cutoff and button call as well. The flop comes A-7-3 and the preflop raiser checks to you. It’s unclear here if the cutoff or button have a piece of this flop or not. If they do, you’d love to bet. If they don’t, you’d love to check to let them bluff or catchup by hitting something on the turn. Now imagine this same scenario except now you’re in position on the button. All of the other players will reveal (to some extent) if they have a piece of the board or not before you get to act, and then you get to make your decision with more information.

One of the things you can do, to fight for position, is to three-bet a hand you might otherwise call with. By three-betting you kick players behind you out of the pot to ensure you have the highest chance of having position in the hand post-flop. You also might just win the hand preflop by three-betting. This may not seem like much, but over the long run this can add up, especially deeper in tournaments when chips are very meaningful.

Nick Petrangelo: In any form of poker, whether it’s tournaments, cash games, sit-n-go’s, no-limit hold’em, short deck, pot-limit Omaha, etc., the in-position (IP) player will always have a strategic advantage, due to the nature of the betting structure. In theory, the concept of positional advantage is evident, even from just looking at simple range data. To fundamentally understand positional disadvantage, I think it’s important to examine equity vs. expected value (EV).

A range’s equity is what percentage of the pot that range is entitled to, while EV is the expected amount of money that range will make. In a single raised pot, a variety of position pairs will have similar or identical equity in some instances, but even in the case of a 50/50 equity split, the in-position player will have higher EV, and therefore...
make more money from the pot, mostly due to positional advantage and equity realization.

Let’s illustrate this concept with a simple range comparison. We’re playing 100 bb (big blinds) deep and we raise from the hijack, making our standard 2.4x open or whatever it may be for your game, with roughly 30% of hands. The big blind defends his 60% or so, and we see the flop. It peels 7♠ 5♥ 4♣. Now if we freeze the hand here, both ranges have about 50% equity, meaning if we just check down the pot, both the out of position (OOP) and in-position (IP) player would win the same amount over time.

However, due to the positional disadvantage of the big blind defender, even on a low board that hits a BB defend range quite hard with some nutty holdings, the IP player will have higher EV, despite having nearly identical equity. The reason for this is simple, the OOP player simply cannot defend enough of his middling equity hands to realize his equity. The reason for this is simple, the OOP player simply cannot defend enough of his middling equity hands to realize his equity. The OOP player has a lot of high card type stuff, K-Q suited, K-J suited, etc., that are 40-50% equity hands. But they have to simply check/fold the flop to IP continuation bets (c-bet). This hand class is being blown off its equity and forced to fold by some very low equity hands that the IP player uses in his c-bet strategy, such as a 10-9, J-10, and Q-10 type hands, that are 25-30% equity holdings.

This fundamental comparison is at the root of positional disadvantage. If we try to defend this portion of our range by calling more c-bets with high cards, the IP player’s strategy will start instantly profiting from his equilibrium turn and river barreling strategy. As the OOP player, we have no strategic option other than to fold the middling equity portion of our range and allow the IP player to realize his EV advantage.

So now why is this concept so important? Once we nail down our fundamentals and start identifying trends and patterns in our opponents play, we can use position to maximally exploit our opponents OOP tendencies, and generate an even more significant EV advantage.

David Baker: You don’t have to be a world champion to understand that position is one of the most important factors in a hand of poker. This is especially true in a tournament. Every hand could be the last for someone involved, and with position you get to be the main decider of pot size and often times determine how many participants will continue in the hand.

There are multiple ways to use your position for maximum effectiveness. In a multi-way pot, for instance, you may determine your hand plays better heads-up. For example, you flopped top pair on a semi-coordinated board. You may choose a bet size big enough to only elicit action from one player. Then on future streets it’s likely you will be checked to. At this point you can choose to keep the pot smaller or inflate the pot based on the turn or information you get from your opponent. When you are out of position, it makes it much more difficult, because the last to act opponent may have been betting a pair, a draw, or just air. Facing bets is always more challenging than making them.

Craig Tapscott: How important is having the lead in the hand and being the aggressor?

Faraz Jaka: Having the lead in the hand, when possible, is extremely valuable. It helps keep your range uncapped so that you can represent a variety of nutted or top-quality hands. Another thing it does, is it allows you to fold your opponent off equity. The person calling can only win by having their hand hold up at a showdown. The person betting can win in two different ways. They can win at showdown, but may also just win the pot by convincing their opponent to fold. When we take the lead in the hand, we can also make opponents fold better hands. Taking the lead usually means going ahead and raising preflop, rather than limping in. It could also mean making a preflop three-bet rather than calling someone else’s raise, so that we become the aggressor with the stronger range preflop.

Here’s an example. The button raises and we call with K♣ 10♦ in the small blind. The board comes A-8-4 and we check. They continuation bet, we fold. Turns out they just had Q♠ J♠. What if we three-bet preflop instead? Then we would be the one continuation betting and they would be the ones folding. Neither of us hit anything, but the player with the lead often forces the other player to fold out equity.

Another example is we raise with pocket threes, the button calls, and the flop comes A-9-5. We decide to continuation bet to represent the ace, and the button makes a very reasonable fold with pocket sixes. Imagine we just limped in preflop, then it’s a lot harder to represent that ace and get pocket sixes to lay down the better hand.

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If you aren’t used to taking this more aggressive line, it will likely put you into some scenarios you are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with. This may cost you money in the short run. But putting yourself in these uncomfortable situations is the only way you will learn to conquer them and take your game to that next level. It’s best to think of these chips lost in the short run as an investment in your game.

**Nick Petrangelo:** Considering only cEV (the positive or negative expected value of your chip stack) for now (we’ll get to positional advantage in ICM scenarios below), when I’m playing IP my dream is to put exactly as much money in the pot as I want to. This applies to being in position in single raised pots vs. an opener, vs the BB, or even being the IP player multi-way. The OOP tendencies that allow the IP player to manipulate pot size and bet sizing based on his hand strength are usually rooted in overall passivity and/or poor c-betting fundamentals. There are a few prevalent population trends relevant here.

Whether we’re playing a single raised pot IP vs the BB, or against an opener, most players struggle to hit the check-raise frequency they’re supposed to. This means we get to punish the OOP player with light value betting, protection betting with good high card hands or small pairs, and generally sizing our bets based on exactly what we think our hand is worth.

Let’s stick with our HJ vs BB 7-5-4-rainbow example from before. If we have Q-Q here, we put our 70% pot c-bet in, and the BB calls. The turn is an offset king. We’re probably supposed to put money in here about 60% of the time with our range, and much less frequently with Q-Q. Why? Because we may get blown off our hand by an aggressive check-raise with a 9-6, A-8, 6-2 suited, etc. However, if we determine our opponent will either fold or call his draws and one-pair hands and he’s lacking this check-raise strategy, we can go ahead and put in value and protection bets with impunity. Especially with a hand class like ours that strongly benefits from extra value and protection. Putting in these thin value and protection bets is my number one exploit IP vs OOP players that are too passive.

Along with missing check-raise bluff frequencies, OOP players tend to miss slow plays more often than they should as well. And if they do find the flop checks with slowplays, they often miss the flop check-raise. This mostly applies to a single-raised or multi-way pots with an initial opener and an IP flopper. For example, we’re playing 100 bb deep, and the HJ has raised, and we’ve called the button. The flop comes K-5-4 rainbow. In theory, the OOP player is supposed to have a very passive c-betting range here, putting money in the pot less than 30% of the time, and building a substantial check-raise strategy. This means checking a lot of strong value hands, such as A-A, A-K, 5-5, 4-4, etc. I believe in practice, OOP players tend to over c-bet their value here, and not find as many check-raise value lines and definitely not check-raise bluff lines.

When I’m confident my opponents are not finding the random A-6 check-raise here, or some gunshot check-raises, or A-x suited hands, I can bet a ton more for value and protection with the middle of my range. I can also use some of my high card “bluffs” to clear out equity and start barreling. As the hand goes on to later streets, if I perceive my opponent won’t have check-raise jams on the turn after check-calling the flop or will lack a huge raise size vs. my small turn bets, I can punish him with thin value and protection betting. I can also add some high equity bluffs I may normally have to check more often, and can choose the sizes that make the most money for my hands in a vacuum.

In addition to these cEV exploits and strategies positional advantage unlocks, it’s also equally relevant and more powerful under ICM conditions. When a covering stack has a positional advantage near a bubble or at a final table, he is able to put maximum ICM pressure on the OOP ranges, as the OOP player will often be forced to play more passively post-flop, and bluff catch significantly tighter than equilibrium bluff catching ranges. Ultimately, positional advantage is a strategic area where the sharper your reads on your opponents are, the more you can maximize the impact the advantage has, and the more EV you can steal.

**David Baker:** Having a lead in a hand can be a very valuable tool. Not only in the hand, but over a series of hands. A well-timed lead or a leading strategy can be an effective way to confuse and set up your opponents. When I’m confident I will be playing with my opponents throughout the day, I like to take a lead approach many times. Since this is a rare strategy it puts them in positions they haven’t been in often. Lead with marginal hands, lead with nothing, lead with monsters.

I like to occasionally take this strategy. Let them try to “set you up” by calling or raising your weak lead. Then be ready to lead with monsters and get them to make massive mistakes. I used this strategy at the final table during my win at the L.A. Poker Classic.

It often left my opponents wondering what I was doing, but I had a plan.

The important thing to remember when leading is to actually have a plan. If the plan is lead and fold, then stick to it. Not all plays have to work on their own. The tourney is the long game. Use each hand not only to maximize that particular hand value, but also to maximize your value throughout the tournament. Don’t forget to make sure you are using these strategies against opponents paying attention. If you are trying to set up a play, make sure you execute it against an opponent aware enough to fall for it. ♠

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**Faraz Jaka** was the 2010 WPT Player of the Year and has won more than $6.7 million in live tournaments. Along with another $4.5 million in online cashes. Follow Jaka on his journey on poker tours around the world on YouTube by searching for FarazJakaPoker. You can find his training videos at PokerCoaching.com/Faraz or reach out to him for one-on-one coaching at Coaching@FarazJaka.com.

Nick Petrangelo is one of the best poker players on the planet and is among the top winners on the high roller circuit with $17.9 million in career live tournament earnings. In 2018 he won the $100,000 buy-in high roller at the WSOP for his second bracelet and $2.9 million. Petrangelo is a top coach at UpSwingPoker.com.

David Baker pocketed a cool $1 million when he won the 2019 WPT L.A. Poker Classic main event. He has $6 million in total live tournament earnings, which include a pair of WSOP bracelets and a final-table finish in the $50,000 Poker Players Championship. Most recently he and fellow poker pro Mark Gregorich teamed up to win the Las Vegas Super Contest sports betting title.

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Poker Stories is a long-form audio podcast series that features casual interviews with some of the game’s best players and personalities. Each episode highlights a well-known member of the poker world and dives deep into their favorite tales both on and off the felt.

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www.CardPlayer.com/poker-podcasts
MJ Gonzales might just be the best poker player you’ve never heard of. No, you’re not living under a rock. As it turns out, the anonymity was intentional.

Throughout his career, Gonzales has mostly kept to himself. Although the other high rollers in his game are certainly aware of his skills, the rest of the poker world is only now discovering the 34-year-old high-stakes crusher.

While tournament winners generally get most of the attention with big payouts and photos holding a trophy, cash game grinders are often overlooked, simply because their results are not made public. But that anonymity was just fine for Gonzales.

He didn’t come to the cardroom for the fame. He didn’t want the spotlight. All he wanted was the money, and more often than not, that’s what he left with.

Over the last few years, however, the Northern California native has come out of the shadows, made himself more public on social media, and even created an instructional platform, Hybrid Poker, which is scheduled to be released to the public this fall. It’s a product that for many years was only available to a handful of select pros and high net worth individuals that paid Gonzales for his service.

“It was a choice to stay private up until the 2019 World Series of Poker,” said Gonzales, who was picked by Daniel Negreanu for his $25,000 fantasy poker team that year. He went on to cash nine times, including two final tables and a third-place showing in the $25,000 pot-limit Omaha championship for $700,000.

It was a strong coming out party for Gonzales, but tournaments, and the pomp and circumstance that comes with them, have never been his favorite.

“All we wanted to do was print as much money as we could and coach the elite. That’s why not many people know who I am. It was by design.”

Those in-the-know, including some of the top players in the world, were turning to Gonzales to plug the leaks in their game. But just who has he been coaching?

Well, he signed non-disclosure agreements with most of his high-profile clients, so most have kept their anonymity. But recently it was revealed that Gonzales and his partner were the...
The duo were instrumental in the improvement the six-time World Series of Poker bracelet winner showed in his $200-$400 no-limit hold'em heads-up match against Doug Polk. Although he ended up losing the match, Polk himself said that the 46-year-old Negreanu made massive strides in his no-limit hold'em game. Polk even went as far as saying that in any future match, he would bet on Negreanu against anyone that wasn’t an elite heads-up player.

Not to mention that skill aside, anything can happen in a 25,000-hand sample size. "You and I play 10 million hands and we are both breakeven. We are both the same skill level for this hypothetical. I can go on an 80-to-100 buy-in downswing and it’s totally normal," explained Gonzales. "And if the public saw me lose 100 buy-ins, they would think that you are 500 times better than I am. They would think that I am dust and that I should hit the showers. But that’s not the way that variance actually works."

"So when people see the Negreanu-Polk heads-up match, [they need to realize] that it is a sample size of nothing. Yes, Doug is a better heads-up player. There’s no arguing that. He deserved the win. Absolutely. But when Daniel would lose three buy-ins in a session, they just looked at the number. They would think ‘Oh my God. It’s $120,000.’ That’s stone f***ing nothing for a heads-up match. It’s just not. So, for Daniel to lose $1 million playing $200-$400 over 25,000 hands, that’s not crazy at all."

With Negreanu’s match officially in the books, Gonzales is now booking high-stakes matches of his own. Most notably, he agreed to a match against Wiktor “Limitless” Malinowski, a Polish high-stakes phenom that is a regular in the biggest online cash games. The brash 26-year-old went on a podcast and offered an open challenge for anyone to play him heads-up. In fact, since he said he was having trouble getting people to gamble with him, Malinowski offered to play drunk.

Initially, there wasn’t anybody going out of their way to accept the challenge. So, Gonzales took it upon himself to battle the former professional handball player, albeit with one caveat. Instead of playing online, like Malinowski wanted, the two professional gamblers would play a $3 million freezeout with $1,000-$2,000 blinds, live in Las Vegas.

Gonzales didn’t stop there. He decided to take on more challenges from other high-stakes pros. After issuing the challenge, he is now slated to play live heads-up matches against Isaac Haxton and Dan Smith, two of the greatest poker minds of all time. The details of those two matches, however, are still being finalized.

"I view Wiktor as the people’s champion, right?" said Gonzales. "So, he made this challenge to everyone in the world and no American stepped up. Not one. And I said ‘You know what? F*** it. Let’s roll. Let’s gamble. Let’s have some fun.’"

Of course, live poker is more fun, and Gonzales was adamant about a face-to-face match on the felt. It may seem a bit counterintuitive to play live given the variance concerns Gonzales already cited with small sample sizes. Those problems could be alleviated in an online setting, but Gonzales said on Twitter that “it takes a special soul” to play live poker at the highest stakes. And that’s an edge that he feels he has over nearly anyone.

"You have to take the gamification out that you experience online," he said about why he wants to play live. "The money is not in front of you. It’s just a click of a button. Live, you don’t have RNG’s, you don’t have charts, you don’t have frequency maps. You don’t have exploitative notes. All this stuff. Everything is me versus you. It’s what I can retain and regurgitate versus what you can retain and regurgitate. And let the best man win."
Aside from the perceived edge in the live arena, Gonzales believes that heads-up no-limit hold’em isn’t Malinowski’s best format.

“I don’t have a huge sample with Wiktor. My read on him is that he is a much better six-max player than he is a heads-up player,” said Gonzales. “Not to take away from his heads-up game. I still think he’s great, but I think he would even say that six-max is by far his strongest variant.”

When Gonzales was tweeting about his desire to play heads-up no-limit hold’em matches, he said there were a few players that he was hoping to play, and only a couple of players that he wouldn’t.

The players he won’t accept a match from are simply players in his general circle of friends that have access to the same information he does. But there is one particular legend of the game that he is hoping takes his offer.

“I would drop everyone and everything right now to play live heads-up against Phil Ivey,” said Gonzales. “I would quit. I would stop everything that I’m doing. I would pitch a tent and I would play Phil Ivey heads-up. For as big as he wants.”

There doesn’t appear to be an avenue for a match with Ivey to happen any time soon, but as Gonzales’ profile grows, there’s always a possibility it could happen in the future.

“I’m a small fry in the poker world right now,” he said. “And I’m planning on changing that. But there was a small piece of me that hopes Phil sees this and says, ‘You know what, kid? I’ll do it. Let’s go.’ That’s what I want.”

Although he might not be on Ivey’s radar yet, he’s certainly close. Gonzales has done his best to remain unknown for several years, but word spreads, and reputations are a hard thing to hide from. Some of the game’s best have already declined offers to play him, despite the fallacy among online players that live players are weaker.

“I think the live reputation is that we suck,” he said. “And I think, unfortunately, there’s a lot of truth to that. Live players don’t get a big enough hand sample. They don’t see enough spots. I think there’s a decent amount of truth to the idea that they’re not studying appropriately compared to the online guys. The way we study poker today is unlike anything we’ve ever seen. If you don’t have a full understanding of CFR data sets, then you’re drawing dead in this game. You don’t have a chance.”

What the online players do lack, in general, are certain skills to make a living in the live arena as their edge decreases over time.

Despite his immense talent, Gonzales still finds a way to get a seat in nosebleed-stakes private games with A-list celebrities. It’s an opportunity that many professionals would kill for, yet most are shut out.

In his opinion, it’s because some pros are too focused on maximizing the expected value of every decision and fail to see the social aspect that live poker has.

“You don’t need social skills to publicly be considered one of the best players in the world, but you do need those skills to make the most money,” he said. “For example, look at Ike Haxton. Nobody thinks he’s the most suave guy in the world. But he’s revered as one of the best poker players in the world. He can’t get into the games that I play. They’d be like ‘Why would we ever f***ing play with him? He’s not friends with the right people and that’s the path he chose.”

That’s no slight on the players like Haxton and other high-profile pros. It’s just a difference in how the two players approach the game from a business perspective.

“Good for you, bro. I celebrate you,” said Gonzales. “You are one of the best in the world and you will continue to be. But you won’t be in the best game. And it all goes back to the questions of, ‘Do you want fame? Or do you want money? Why are you doing this?’ I made a decision that I want to make the most money. I don’t want to be poor. I don’t want my daughter to experience what I experienced when I was younger.”

Once Gonzales got a seat in those games, he realized that he needed to take the worst of it in the short-term to ensure that he continues to be invited back. He’s not dishonest about his skill or hiding his talent, but he makes sure that people enjoy the experience of gambling with him, win or lose.

“You absolutely tell people in the private scene that you’re a professional, but you should give action. You should straddle, you should flip, you should be able to give rebates,” explained Gonzales.

“There are all these social protocols that poker players don’t seem to get these days, and this is why you see poker moving towards private games. Nobody wants to sit next to the grinder that’s berating the fish. Nobody wants to sit next to the guy with headphones and an iPad watching a movie. No one wants to sit there and wait for 30 seconds while a guy tank-checks. That shit is in the past. That’s over. The whales and the recreational players have had enough of that.”

That’s not to say that pros aren’t
allowed to make money in those games. It’s just about utilizing a different skill set. It’s about identifying the type of experience the whale is looking for and delivering that to him.

“There are types of whales that want to be preflop warriors and just want to get all the money in as soon as possible,” said Gonzales. “And there’s types of whales that love to see flops, and they just want to try to draw. And there’s some types of whales that love to see all the way down to the river. You have to kind of navigate those waters and understand which type you’re up against.”

In these situations, Gonzales says it’s all about being aware. Aware of not only how your opponents react to certain bets, but also how they react socially.

“What jokes did they laugh at? What jokes did they not laugh at? Are they even a type to joke? Or do they just want to sit there and gamble? Do they want to see more flops? Does he huff and puff when he has to fold preflop? Is he hesitant to straddle? Is he the one driving the straddle? There’s all these different personality types and you just have to be observant.”

When Gonzales is in a game with celebrities, it even goes a step further than that. It’s about having those players respect you as a peer. It’s yet another art form to making a living in the high-stakes private games.

“A buddy of mine, also a professional poker player, was playing with one of the comedians,” Gonzales recalled. “He told the guy, ‘If I win this pot, you have to take a picture with me.’ The comedian says okay, they play the hand and my buddy wins the pot. So they take a picture. It was one of those Polaroid cameras, so he grabbed the photo and started shaking it out. Then he looked at the picture and looked back at the comedian and said, ‘Man, you look like shit. I wouldn’t show this to anyone.’ And then he lit the picture on fire. That’s a genius move. You needle him and you show him you don’t care [about his celebrity status]. Now you’re on his level.”

Gonzales doesn’t have the stereotypical poker resume to brag about. He doesn’t have millions in tournament earnings or a bracelet, but he’s carved out a lifestyle for himself that most aspiring poker pros don’t even know exists.

And he’s not done yet. He doesn’t plan on being in poker forever, but there are a few things he wants to accomplish before he goes back into the proverbial shadows and into our periphery. After he launches Hybrid Poker, he wants to play the biggest stakes ever played. And after he beats those games, the plan is to quietly retire from poker and get more serious with his investments.

But just how big are the biggest games? As it turns out… massive.

“In Macau or Malaysia, they are playing $10,000-$25,000 no-limit hold’em and upwards of $25,000-$50,000 no-limit,” said Gonzales. “I’m not sure how often those games are spread, but they’re swinging $75 million to $100 million per session.”

Hybrid Poker is a revolutionary, technology-based solution for poker training. The mobile app uses an adaptive training model for teaching players the mechanics of GTO poker strategy used by Daniel Negreanu and the like! For the first time ever, this software can score mixed strategies and uses a progressive AI guided learning system that ensures you learn elite level play faster than any other product on the market. The once-exclusive private training solution will now be made available to the public. This is the new era of poker. Sign up today at www.hybridpoker.com.
ANKUSH MANDAVIA

DISCUSSES HIS TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO THE LIVE TOURNAMENT SCENE

The 33-Year-Old WSOP Bracelet Winner Now Has $5.5 Million In Career Earnings After CPPT Venetian Victory

By Erik Fast

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By Erik Fast

A
nkush Mandavia has been back on the live tournament circuit for just a short while following a year-long hiatus caused by the COVID-19 shutdown. The total shutdown of the live tournament circuit during the spring of 2020 led him back online, where he racked up 23 cashes in online events that released real-name results during the shutdown. While none of those scores were particularly large by his standards, the action allowed Mandavia to stay sharp against tough competition during the layoff, which paid off handsomely once live poker returned.

He managed to win the very first tournament that he entered, outlasting a field of 652 entries in the 2021 Card Player Poker Tour Venetian $2,500 buy-in main event to win $260,000 and his ninth live tournament title.

“It’s amazing. This is actually my first tournament back,” said Mandavia shortly after coming out on top. “When I went to register and got a player’s card they told me it had been exactly one year since I last played here. That’s kind of crazy, but it feels good.”

In his short time back on the live grind, Mandavia has already managed three deep runs in major live events for a total of $342,615 in earnings.

The 33-year-old backed up his victory at Venetian with two strong showings in marquee events at the Wynn Spring Classic, finishing sixth in the $10,500 buy-in high roller event and 10th in the $3,500 buy-in championship event for $49,800 and $32,815 paydays, respectively. Mandavia’s successful return to the live arena has resulted in him flying up the Card Player Player of the Year race leaderboard. He currently sits in sixth place with 1,420 points, and is well-positioned for a run at surpassing his previous best year-end POY race ranking of 12th place set in 2016.

The Michigan native and University of Georgia graduate has now been playing poker professionally for more than decade, and currently resides in Las Vegas. He got his start playing online but had transitioned to focusing on the live circuit by 2015. Mandavia has accrued just shy of $5.5 million in recorded tournament earnings throughout his career, including winning the 2016 World Series of Poker $5,000 buy-in no-limit hold’em turbo
because there was really not much else to do. The pandemic caused me to play a little bit more poker, but when I was playing, I was playing live. Surprisingly, everything hit the fan, we knew live poker was just going to shut down, and I figured it was going to be for a while.

I wasn’t playing too much poker actually at that point, but when I was playing, I was playing live. Surprisingly, the pandemic caused me to play a little bit more poker because there was really not much else to do.

What other interests were you pursuing at the time?

AM: I was just spending some time trying to learn other industries, mostly about real estate and a few other things. I had only been part-time for maybe six months or so, but I was figuring out what I might do next.

EF: So you ended up returning to playing more poker during the shutdown, returning to your roots as an online player. Did you feel comfortable transitioning back to playing exclusively on the internet after having been focused on live play in recent years?

AM: It was definitely weird, and I felt very behind the times when I first started. It felt like all the good players have gotten a lot better working with the tools that were available, and I was just caught up playing live poker where I didn’t really need to use those. I mean, those tools would’ve helped me also, but regardless, people were definitely way ahead of me when I first resumed playing online last year.

I felt lost. I had a few months where I was making some deep runs and making a lot of mistakes late in tournaments. And I felt I was in this combination of running bad and being behind the times as well. But then, playing over and over and over for all of those months, I felt I got a lot better than I was previously. It was definitely weird how it worked out, because I wasn’t planning on playing that much poker, and then the pandemic hit, and I started playing basically full-time again.

EF: After several months of a full-on shutdown, the live poker tournament scene began to return in the latter half of 2020. What was your thought process when you considered your own return?

AM: I was undecided for a while. I decided against playing when the rooms first opened up again. When these tournaments started going off successfully, I just decided that if there weren’t any outbreaks as a result, that I would start to play again. I waited quite a bit, compared to some others. I mean my first tournament was the CPPT $2,500 buy-in main event at Venetian in late February. So that was a few big series into the year. I skipped the World Poker Tour series in Florida and a few others, so I just waited a bit to see how it would play out and then finally decided to jump into it.

EF: There have been a lot of huge turnouts for poker tournaments in recent months, which seems to indicate some pent-up demand. What are your thoughts on the mini-boom that seems to be happening on the live circuit?

AM: I think it’s a combination of factors that have led to all the huge turnouts, including that the [stock] markets have been doing well over the past year. People not being able to play has made them more excited, and it’s a different atmosphere at the table. I feel like people are happy to be there now. They have more of an appreciation for being able to play and are not taking it for granted, pros and recreational players alike. I think both groups are just more excited to be able to play the game.

EF: Do you see this post-shutdown boom continuing?

AM: I think it’s going to continue. I think people are wanting to play live and participate in these big series. I mean, even before the pandemic, I think the live circuit generally seemed to be seeing increases in turnout. But now people are just especially ready to get out and play. I think whenever the World Series of Poker runs, it will be pretty big. I think tournaments will continue to grow for a while moving forward.

EF: As you’ve mentioned, the first live tournament you played was the CPPT Venetian main event, which you ended up winning for $260,000. What was the experience of sitting back down at the table for the first time after a long layoff like?

AM: It was definitely a little weird at first, with the plexiglass table dividers, and the mask, and having to sanitize your hands. It felt like a new experience, but then when the cards came out and I started playing, it quickly felt very comfortable, even if there are a few things that are harder now.

You’re not able to see people’s chips very well, and announcing bets can be tough because you’re announcing through a mask to a dealer who also has a mask on. So, there are just a few small things like that that are different and were sometimes difficult to deal with. But overall, it was very similar. I was texting my friends during the tournament, even when I was down to half of the starting stack in that event, saying, ‘I’m actually having fun doing this, it’s just fun to be here.’
EF: You ended up bagging up more than three times the starting stack by the end of the day one. Were there any particular hands of note, or was it just a steady day of grinding and getting used to being back in the saddle?

AM: I don’t remember anything special about what happened on day 1, outside of getting used to playing live again. I think I mostly just won some normal pots, there weren’t any big all-ins or anything like that. In order to bag up a stack on any day 1 you have to run pretty well, though, so I obviously did that and ended up with a decent stack.

EF: By the end of day two, there were only 27 left and you were in 18th chip position. What’s your mindset at that point?

AM: I didn’t have too high of expectations, given my chip position, but I was like, ‘Well, it’s a good spot to be in. If I get lucky enough to run it up, then there’ll be an opportunity.’ But, going into the day, I was just happy to have a deep run, and if I ended up busting in 25th place, I wasn’t going to be upset about it. The field was pretty good, there were some tough players remaining, but I thought that if I ran up a stack I’d have a good shot.

EF: Just a few eliminations away from the final table you ran pocket kings into pocket aces, but managed to make a full house to surge up the leaderboard. Did you start putting any pressure on yourself, having not been in the live arena for a while, to convert this opportunity into a podium finish or a big score?

AM: Yeah, when that happened and I got the chips, I just felt like it was back to pre-COVID. I was just in the mindset of, ‘I’ve been in this spot a hundred times, or thousands if you include online play, so I know how to proceed from here.’ I just reverted back to the strategy that I’ve learned over the years, including what I’d learned over the past year playing online. There were a lot of good players like [three-time WSOP bracelet winner] Kristen Bicknell and [World Poker Tour champion] Alex Foxen, and a bunch of other players that were still in. So I couldn’t just run everyone over, but luckily the cards just kept coming and I was able to do pretty well.

EF: You ended up outlasting those tough players and made a deal heads-up for $260,000 and the title. Just a few weeks later you made another big final table, finishing sixth in the $10,000 buy-in high roller at the Wynn Spring Classic. How did it feel jumping right back into the high-stakes tournaments?

AM: I was a lot more comfortable in that tournament, probably somewhat due to having just done well in the CPPT Venetian. But, then again, it was also just like reverting back to what I had already done and what I already knew about playing poker. Everything already felt natural and normal again. I thought I actually played a lot better in that tournament, as well as in the Wynn Spring Classic $3,500 main event, which I finished tenth in, than I did in the tournament I actually won. That’s just how it works sometimes, that I ended up with sixth and tenth place finishes instead of a title even though I played better.

EF: As a result of your two final-table finishes already this year, you currently sit just outside of the top five in the 2021 Card Player Player of the Year race. What would it mean to you to win an award like POY, which seeks to reward consistency over the span of 12 months?

AM: I think it would be cool to win. I would be honored to earn an award like that. I think, when I get older, having these trophies and awards and things that I can show my family and friends in 20 or 30 years would be cool. Winning the POY award requires playing a lot, so I’m not sure how much I’m willing to travel in order to follow the circuit this year. There are so many good players out there that are willing to go to every stop and grind a lot more than I am, so I think they have definitely a big advantage over me in terms of winning the POY, but I would love to win it. It would be great.

EF: What are your current plans for the rest of the year?

AM: They have a lot of tournaments that are going to be coming through Las Vegas and Los Angeles, and a few other places I might go to like Florida. I’m just going to continue playing, maybe on a somewhat lighter schedule. I believe I do better when I feel like playing instead of forcing myself to play, and right now, I definitely feel like playing.

Mandavia’s Top Tournament Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Payout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2016</td>
<td>$100,000 PCA High Roller</td>
<td>3rd Place</td>
<td>$787,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>$5,000 WSOP Turbo NLHE</td>
<td>1st Place</td>
<td>$548,139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2016</td>
<td>$25,000 Five Diamond High Roller</td>
<td>1st Place</td>
<td>$403,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2015</td>
<td>$100,000 Five Diamond High Roller</td>
<td>5th Place</td>
<td>$307,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 2021</td>
<td>$2,500 CPPT Venetian</td>
<td>1st Place</td>
<td>$260,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 2015</td>
<td>$25,000 SHR Poker Open High Roller</td>
<td>4th Place</td>
<td>$186,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2016</td>
<td>$100,000 Five Diamond High Roller</td>
<td>6th Place</td>
<td>$186,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2017</td>
<td>$5,000 CPPT Venetian</td>
<td>5th Place</td>
<td>$166,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2016</td>
<td>$5,000 WPT bestbet Bounty Scramble</td>
<td>3rd Place</td>
<td>$152,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2015</td>
<td>$25,000 Aria High Roller</td>
<td>3rd Place</td>
<td>$141,000</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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Card Player Poker School
A common mistake many players make is to overvalue their decently strong, but non-premium hands.

In a $1,500 buy-in tournament, everyone folded to a loose, splattery player on the button who raised to 300 at 50-100 blinds out of his 30,000 stack. I called from the big blind with 10♠ 7♣. While my call may seem a bit loose, 10-7 is certainly playable as long as I play well post-flop.

The flop came A♠ 10♦ 3♣, giving me middle pair. I checked, and my opponent bet 300 into the 650 pot. I called.

Some especially weak players may think I should fold immediately on the flop because I am often behind to an ace, but it is important to realize that even when I am behind, I will improve to two pair or trips on the turn from time to time. Also, I have no reason to think my opponent so tight and straightforward to the point that he will only bet hands better than mine. Pretty much everyone will bet a hand like flush draws on this flop, and many players will bet with their entire range, putting my middle pair in decent shape.

The turn was the 7♦, giving me two pair while also completing the flush draw. I checked, my opponent bet 1,100 into the 1,250 pot, and I called.

When my opponent bets large, he is essentially saying that he has a polarized range, meaning he either has a premium made hand (most of which I lose to) or a draw (which I may or may not have a lot of equity against, depending on how strong it is).

This is a classic “way ahead or way behind” scenario. In this case, raising does not make sense because I will only get called by better made hands that crush me and strong straight flush draws that are getting the right price to call.

The river was the 5♠. I checked and my opponent checked behind.

If my opponent bet the river, I would have reluctantly called. Against loose, splattery opponents, it is important to realize that they frequently get to the river with many missed draws and generally junky holdings. While they will have more random flushes like 9♠ 3♣ in their range than the normal player, they also have more busted flush draws like Q♣ 9♣. For the most part, you should call...
These players’ river bets with bluff catchers more often than normal unless they prove that they only bet the river with the nuts.

I turned my hand face-up and my opponent quickly mucked. He most likely had an ace that went for thin value on the turn (also a marginal made hand) and opted to see a cheap showdown. As long as his ace had a high kicker, I don’t mind his play. If it had a weak kicker though, he should have checked, looking to see a cheap showdown.

Deuce to Seven Triple Draw Lowball: Dealing With Nines After The First Draw

By Kevin Haney

Once you have a solid understanding of the fundamentals, play after the first draw in Deuce-to-Seven Triple Draw Lowball (2/7TD) is relatively straightforward, especially in heads-up pots. If you didn’t feel that way before, hopefully you do now after reading the previous articles in the series. (If you happened to miss them, that grievous error can be rectified by checking them out in the online archive.)

However, pat nines or potential draws to them after the first draw will often present some interesting decisions, and in this issue we will discuss the most important factors to consider.

Pat Nines Versus Opponent Drawing One (D1)

In a heads-up pot, whether or not we should pat a nine low depends upon our underlying draw, the cards we have seen, and our opponent’s range, with the strength of our potential draw (should we choose to break) being the most important factor to consider.

A pat nine is most often a favorite against a D1 with two draws to go, but so is the superior draw:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draw 1</th>
<th>Draw 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9-7-5-4-2 (57%)</td>
<td>8-6-5-2 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-5-4-2 (56%)</td>
<td>8-6-5-2 (44%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above situation we would “break off” a tiny amount of equity by choosing to break instead of patting, yet we should always draw in this situation in order to preserve our implied odds that comes with the ability to make a premium holding.

The higher the likelihood there is that you hold the best D1, the more apt you should be to break. In general, we should tend to break pat nines where our underlying draw is to a seven or a smooth eight such as 8-5-3-2. When we say a draw to a seven, it is important to understand we are talking about hands where we hold a deuce and thus do not have a straight draw. We should definitely pat a holding such as 9-7-6-4-3 since only a deuce will make us a seven low and a draw to 7-6-4-3 is most often an underdog to what our opponent has.

When the situation is relatively close, we should think about our opponent’s range and the cards we have seen, i.e. blockers. A villain who originally opened from early position and drew two (D2) will have a stronger D1 range than someone who defended the big blind against a late position open.

With regards to blockers, if we have seen a few pairs along the way this will reduce the frequency that our opponent will make a pat hand. For example, if we hold 9-8-6-5-2 and have seen two other fives, we should go ahead and pat, especially if villain had opened from early position and thus is more likely to have a strong D1 draw.

A draw to an 8-6 low is on the border so when holding it we should always consider these other factors. Any 9-8-7 low (e.g. 9-8-7-5-2) should be parred and we should also pat holdings with an underlying straight draw such as 9-6-5-4-2 as we have fewer outs to make a seven or eight low.

Pat Nines Versus Opponent Drawing Two (D2)

Against a D2 we should be more apt to pat as our
The situation as if we are up against a D1 to begin with.

To break a little more often and more generally consider D1/pat. Therefore, from out-of-position we should tend or not villain is still drawing two or has improved to at we don’t know the result of his first draw and whether drawing two, our decision to break is a little easier as worst is a sensible approach; however, if our opponent ever stands pat in front of us we should break.

Out-of-position against an opponent who was drawing two, our decision to break is a little easier as we don’t know the result of his first draw and whether or not villain is still drawing two or has improved to at D1/pat. Therefore, from out-of-position we should tend to break a little more often and more generally consider the situation as if we are up against a D1 to begin with.

D1 To A Nine Versus A Villain’s D1

Here we are weighing the option between drawing to 9-7-3-2 or 7-3-2 against an opponent who was a D1 on the first draw. When we hold position, we have the luxury of knowing whether or not our opponent improved and if he is still drawing the equity situation with two draws to go may resemble the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>9732 (58%) vs. 258 (42%)</th>
<th>732 (52%) vs. 258 (48%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2379</td>
<td>2568 (59%)</td>
<td>2568 (61%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have higher equity drawing to the nine and have more turn fold equity on our side when our opponent fails to improve once again.

Knowing when to keep or discard nines after the first draw in 27TD can get complicated; however, experience and thinking through the most important considerations will greatly aid us in making the best possible decision.

Kevin Haney is a former actuary of MetLife but left the corporate job to focus on his passions for poker and fitness. He is co-owner of Elite Fitness Club in Oceanport, NJ and is a certified personal trainer. With regards to poker he got his start way back in 2003 and particularly enjoys taking new players interested in mixed games under his wing and quickly making them proficient in all variants. If interested in learning more playing mixed games online, or just saying hello he can be reached at haneyke612@gmail.com

TAKE SOME TIME TO RECOGNIZE YOUR RUN GOOD

By Nathan Gamble

As is typical of most aspiring poker pros, I had an on-again off-again relationship with money at various points in my career. Some days it was spilling out of my pocket, and the next day I was scrugging for $5 to buy a red solo cup for entry into a college party. It was simple times though, and while money was important there wasn’t a mortgage to worry about, car payments to make, or debts to settle. It was just nice to usually have a bank account with a positive number attached to it.

Before leaving for college, I had bought myself a Walmart-special laptop, enough to write papers for class and play online. It wasn’t the fancy set ups you see in pictures from the old school online legends with multiple monitors stacked side by side, but it worked well enough for the heralded Sunday tournament grind. I had won a satellite into the now-defunct Full Tilt Poker $750,000 guarantee tournament at noon, and 15 hours later I was at the final table.

I was second in chips when I picked up pocket queens preflop against the only person at the table who had me covered. It was a classic coin flip against his A-K and I was left gripping the edge of my seat as I watched
the board run out to give him a full house. Game. Set. Match.

The only thing that lessoned the ICM blow was the freshly minted $17,500 sitting in my account. It was a minor salve to the pain of busting in seventh, but it helped shore up plans for my spring break.

I have a history of being impulsive when it comes to large purchases, and this time was no different. My bank account went from a meager three digits to a healthy five figures, and it was time to celebrate! Without seeing if anyone would join me, I decided on a trip from Colorado, through Arizona, to Honolulu.

While I was prepping for the trip my stroke of good fortune continued as an Ultimate Bet representative messaged me and said in exchange for a $15,000 deposit, they would give me a free seat into their $3,000 main event. I quickly withdrew the money from Full Tilt, booked my hotel in Hawaii, and deposited the remainder on UB. It once again left me with only three digits in the bank, but I was secure in the knowledge that I could withdraw whatever I needed after playing their event.

The days trickled by slowly, and then in a flash I was packing my bag and heading to the airport. I said, ‘adios’ to the cold and snow and jumped on a plane to Arizona. I was trying to be conscious of my small bank account and had booked a connecting flight with an overnight delay, so upon landing in Arizona I headed to a local hotel to grab some shut eye before my 9:30 am departure.

The next morning rolled around and it was a lazy start to the day before sauntering up to the airline counter for check in. Except I couldn’t check in. The plane had already announced last call and shut its doors! The time zone change between Denver and Arizona was only an hour, but it was just enough to throw me for a loop. After a few frantic phone calls to the gate, they informed me no matter how fast I ran they couldn’t let me on. Maybe it was the desperation on my face, maybe it was the look of stupidity plastered across my brow, or maybe she was just a kind agent, but she went out of her way to transfer my seat onto a flight leaving later in the day. I wish I knew her name because I’d love to give her a huge shoutout for her empathy. Thank you, mystery airline lady!

After taking care of the plane issue, I was left with a more immediate dilemma, what to do with my extra eight hours in the airport? I did what any young ‘professional’ poker player would do and saddled up to a California Pizza Kitchen for some breakfast, WIFI, and an all-day session online.

After playing UB’s main event a week prior and attempting to withdraw the balance, they hit me with the fine print. Apparently, you had to generate a certain amount of rake in order to withdraw your money after participating in the bonus. I don’t remember what that number was, but it was enough to make me panic as I wouldn’t be able to generate it in the near future and 90% of my funds were locked up. As such, the all-day session online was geared towards getting as much play as quickly as possible. Instead of playing the $11-$55 sit-n-go’s I should have been in, I fired up four tables of $5-$10 and $10-$20 heads-up PLO.

I was just praying things went well, but I was well outside my normal depth. It should have been a lesson in
seeing how fast I could blow my bankroll. It should have been a lesson in game selection. Maybe even a lesson on picking my opponent. (I stupidly chose to play top pro Jeff ‘yellowsub’ Williams).

Instead, the deck ran over me to the tune of $15,000 in profit over the course of eight hours. In fact, one of the hands still holds the record for me as the largest pot I’ve ever played. The blinds were $10-$20 and Jeff opened the button for $70, I looked at a marvelous A-A-6-7, and with stacks sitting at over $8,000 to start the hand, quickly pumped it up to $210.

That didn’t seem to faze him as he came right back over the top to $630. This was already more money than I usually played for, but I knew that the money had to go in. I nervously five-bet to $1,890, which he called after some consideration. The pot had grown to almost $4,000 and we still had $6,000 each!

The flop rolled off an innocuous 5-4-4 rainbow, giving me a straight-draw and a stomach full of butterflies. Before I truly knew what happened, all of our remaining money had gone in and I was staring at a $16,000 pot and Jeff’s flopped trips. I looked up and said a silent prayer as the turn rolled off a beautiful eight to give me a straight and I managed to hold on through the river.

Apparently, he had had enough as shortly after that monster pot he quit me. In a moment of serendipity, a voice from above came over the loudspeaker announcing they had an upgrade available to first class. After the day I had, it only seemed right to arrive in Hawaii in style!

Sometimes in life everything you do is correct, all the decisions are perfect, and you still lose out. Conversely, sometimes you make every poor choice you can, can’t think fast enough, and yet the world conspires to reward your abysmal decisions. Next time you are sitting at the table cursing your luck, perhaps it’s the right time to realize all the times in life you have been far ‘luckier’ than your choices deserved.

Nathan Gamble is a native of Texas where he learned to play Texas hold’em from his father. He is a two-time WSOP bracelet winner, the first coming in the 2017 WSOP $1,500 pot limit Omaha Eight-Or-Better Event, the second in the 2020 Online WSOP $600 PLO8/b event. A fixture of the mid-stakes, mix game community, he can often be found playing $80-$160 mix games at the Wynn since moving to Las Vegas in 2019. He is active on Twitter under the username Surfbum4life and streams mixed game content regularly on Twitch under his username Surfbum4lyfe.

THE CHRIS MONEYMAKER STORY CONTINUES

By Gavin Griffin

After graduating from college, my wife took a job at Los Angeles County Public Works. We lived in Fullerton at the time, a college town in northern Orange County, about 25 miles from her office. She didn’t last too long at that job because the 50 miles of commute each day would take her around three hours in LA traffic.

Perhaps because she was already in a foul mood from the commute, she started to develop opinions about Chris Moneymaker of all people. There was a billboard on her route that featured Chris in an Aston Martin with scantily-clad models surrounding him. The ad was for a PokerStars promotion called The Moneymaker Millionaire, which was a freeroll with a $1 million first prize.

The ad made a lasting impression. For some time, my wife would make comments about Chris whenever he came up. Then, when I was signed by PokerStars, she met him. She was ready to dislike the guy she had stared at in bumper-to-bumper traffic for hours, but as she found out, it’s very hard to dislike Chris Moneymaker.

My first event as a sponsored pro was the 2008 European Poker Tour main event in Monte Carlo, which Chris also attended. It didn’t take him long to win her over with his friendly disposition and charm. To this day, she thinks of him fondly.

If you’re reading this, I imagine you almost certainly know the Moneymaker story. But for those who might be new to poker, I’ll briefly summarize. As a casual poker player, he won a satellite online, and then a few months later, took down the World Series of Poker main event for $2.5 million. It’s a story that is so ubiquitous in the poker world that it’s hard to imagine the time before you knew about it.

I used to read the late Andy Glazer’s tournament reports religiously, and it was in his nightly
It’s hard for me to be gregarious and outgoing. But Chris could do that... even though it might not have always been his favorite thing to do. Many people have asked me over the years about Chris, and I’m always ready to tell them that he’s a good guy who loves doing his part to grow the game.

Getting to know Chris over the time we were both sponsored by PokerStars was a joy, and I’m glad we became friends over the years. Chris was always in higher demand at these events than I was, but we found time to hang out at every stop. I was actually shocked when he and PokerStars parted ways at the end of last year. I think if the Scheinberg family was still running the company, Chris would have been a sponsored pro for life. But I still so closely associated him with PokerStars, that it was tough to think of them ever breaking up.

And now that he’s sponsored by Americas Cardroom, I expect nothing but good things from them. Chris confirmed my suspicions almost immediately by launching a campaign that raised $100,000 for the Tunica Humane Society, as well as a great promotion with ACR called The Next Moneymaker that will award one player a $105,000 sponsorship.

We went from being an unknown accountant in Tennessee to the most-talked about poker player in the world overnight, and while there were struggles along the way, he is still around 18 years later making the best of his opportunities.

I defended Chris to my wife when she saw those billboards. I spoke up for Chris’ playing style to all kinds of people who thought he was bad at poker because of a few televised hands played back in 2003. But the truth is that I’ll always be a fan of Chris Moneymaker because he makes it so easy on me.

Gavin Griffin was the first poker player to capture a World Series of Poker, European Poker Tour and World Poker Tour title and has amassed nearly $5 million in lifetime tournament winnings. Griffin is sponsored by HeroPoker.com. You can follow him on Twitter @NHGG.
Have you caught a run of cards that were so bad you thought the pain would never end? Perhaps your entire bankroll got flushed while on a bad run and took you from hero back to zero? After all, even the great Doyle Brunson has shared stories of year-long losing streaks that seemed impossible to overcome at the time.

What if your bad run lasted longer than a month, or a year? What if it were a decade? Could you still recover, or would you throw in the towel? If despite all the talent in the world, you’ve been cold decked to a point of giving up, then read on. And allow me to share some insight that could be your secret weapon should you one day find yourself holding on to a chip and chair.

Thank you to those of you that have noticed my absence over the past few issues. If you’re guessing I was on holiday in Rome, or perhaps aboard a private jet being whisked away to some exotic location in an effort to take down a monster cash game full of wealthy and celebrated people, sadly, that was not the case. Instead, I found myself in the emergency room spending five days in ICU as my heart ejection fraction had dropped to a terrifying 3%.

I’d like to give a special thank you to all of the great doctors, nurses and staff at Missouri University Hospital in Columbia who sprang into action before my heart went from 3% to me being dead on the table. It looks like I live to fight another day.

Historically, I hate sharing non-poker bad beat stories, but seeing as how the doctors wouldn’t allow me to leave the hospital without strapping on a defibrillator vest, I figured, what the hell, there’s a life lesson here.

My recent heart failure is not the first time I came close to heading off to that big poker game in the sky. After the crash of 2008, when my first heart related bad beat came, it was on the heels of a slew of stressful and unfortunate events. For one, my world had been rocked after Molly Bloom gave my name along with Tobey Maguire and all the players in our game to the FBI for their investigation into disgraced hedge fund manager Brad Ruderman.

My production company had been stiffed $4 million from a distributor. If that wasn’t bad enough, I was still bleeding from the Ultimate Blackjack Tour debacle that cost me a distributor fortune when all of our advertising got pulled amidst the first round of attacks to the online gaming industry. The event not only cost me $800,000 out of pocket, but the related UB allegations hurt a lot of future business for me as well.

So, losing $1 million dollars in a single night, as seen by the character playing me in the film Molly’s Game, and making a deal with Tobey Maguire to pay it back was the least of my worries. If you’ve read my book Billion Dollar Hollywood Heist, then you know I won the loan back in a few weeks. Still, with everything else falling down around me, I had to quit playing high-stakes poker. I hope as fellow poker players, you can imagine how hard it would be to walk away from the softest high-stakes poker game in history.

Contrary to popular belief, I didn’t leave the game because I could no longer sweat the terms of the onerous deal I made with Tobey. I decided to stop playing in the game because a professional keeps his or her poker bankroll separate from the problems of everyday life, something I could no longer do. Things had gotten so bad that I literally couldn’t afford to lose, and as much as I valued having an edge, that edge can fade fast when a loss means you have to dip into your life savings in order to recover.

The hits kept coming, as Uncle Sam decided to come after me for my 2006 tax return. The IRS made a decision to disallow all of my losses in poker but accepted all of my wins. Between federal and state, they wanted a cool million. My $3 million dollar home was worth just $1.2 million after the crash, plus the Ruderman case placed another $750,000 lien to the house on top of that.

My wife and kids had already moved to Boston by the time I went into the hospital the first time, so I was pretty much going it alone with the exception of some good buddies who kept checking on me. Looking back, if I hadn’t had a heart attack, I might have just driven off a cliff. And things just kept getting worse from there! I was getting cold decked by life like an alarming degree. No matter how resilient I felt I was, I knew that I had to make some serious changes in my life to regain all of the things that my career both as a producer and a high-stakes poker player had allotted me.

In 2016, after numerous attempts to regain my fortune, I finally decided to leave the city of angels and head back to the small town in southern Illinois where I grew up. At this time in my life, I couldn’t help but notice the friends and colleagues who were once my equals or in my rearview mirror, were selling their companies and cashing out for anywhere between $30 to $300 million! Others were running major networks, or producing hit TV shows. And my pals in the poker world, guys like Antonio Esfandiari and Phil Hellmuth who I had known since they were grinders, were enjoying the fruits of their hard-earned labor as well.

I woke up one day and realized that my health problems, along with a severe dose of depression, had beaten my ass for nearly a decade! I had once been the guy who said, “If you take away everything I’ve got and leave me for dead in a ditch, I’ll find a way to get it all back in record time!” But after losing millions of dollars, and having doctors tell me that I would probably only live another five years, the man I once was had become a distant memory.

But five years after the five years I was told I would kick the bucket, I was still alive, and technically still in the game! At the very least, I had a chip and a chair. Now all I needed was to get reacquainted with my younger self again, with the guy who always knew how to win, and had the drive, determination and skill to pull off the impossible. Was that guy gone forever? I was determined to find out.

I began writing about my life. Not just what ended up becoming my first book, Billion Dollar Hollywood Heist, but I also wrote thousands of pages on my early life as a card mechanic, which contains highly-guarded secrets that I hope will one day help poker players and casinos protect their games from card manipulation experts. I also decided to start taking new opportunities one at a time, without worrying about being on top the way I was in the mid 2000’s. Before I knew it, my doctor told me that my heart had miraculously made a full recovery!
It wasn’t until I gave myself permission to move at a slower pace, play at smaller stakes tables so to speak, that my life finally started making sense again. Next thing I know, I’m engaged to a beautiful and amazing woman, I spent much overdue time with my daughters, and felt happy again for the first time in years. In poker terms, I guess you could say I’ve been running good. Not “running over the game” good, but good enough to begin building an exciting new business in addition to having a bestselling book with another being released later this year. (Heck, I’ve even won a bet with my 13-year-old daughter after officially becoming a YouTube micro influencer.)

Things have been going great, and this past year I started feeling like my old self again. Then, without notice, like a ghost from the past, I find myself back in the hospital, in an ICU for five days surrounded by doctors who are shocked that I had even survived.

Am I going to let it send me into a depressive state leaving me unmotivated and unproductive like I did before? Hell no! Since getting out of the hospital, I’ve been sluggish and slow on the trigger when it comes to work. But today I decided to ante up again and keep on grinding! So, take it from me… if you’ve been cold decked in poker or in life to the point where you feel you can’t recover, take my advice. Like Phil Hellmuth says, “Never give up!”

Once you decide to give it another go, you might get disappointed again. You might end up back in the proverbial ICU just like before. But this time, you will know, that life can be good again, and that anything worth having comes with patience, sacrifice, and the ability to handle the swings the world throws at us. I don’t know if I’ll ever achieve all the things I set out to do when I was in my 30s, but I know now that I’m damn sure never going to stop trying.

If you are ever at a place in your life where you feel there’s no way back to even, I hope you will remember this column and realize that it’s never too late to get back in the game. I have monumental goals for my life moving forward. I hope you do as well! Thanks for reading and remember, stay sharp… stay Kardsharp! 🍀

Houston Curtis, founder of KardSharp.com and author of Billion Dollar Hollywood Heist has lived a successful double life as both a producer and high stakes poker player for nearly 30 years. His credits include executive producing gambling-related TV shows such as The Ultimate Blackjack Tour on CBS. The Aruba Poker Classic on GSN and pioneering the poker instructional DVD genre with titles featuring poker legend Phil Hellmuth. Barred for life from Las Vegas Golden Nugget for ‘excessive winning’ at blackjack. Houston is one of the world’s most successful card mechanics and sleight-of-hand artists of the modern era. Curtis, who rarely plays in tournaments, won a 2004 Legends of Poker no-limit hold’em championship event besting Scotty Nguyen heads-up at the final table before going on to co-found the elite Hollywood poker ring that inspired Aaron Sorkin’s Academy Award-nominated film Molly’s Game. Curtis now resides in Columbia, Missouri while maintaining offices in Los Angeles and Phoenix, Arizona. In addition to running a production company and independent record label, Curtis also consults as a poker protection expert to clients across the globe seeking insight into master level card cheating tactics via advanced sleight-of-hand technique. In addition, Houston is now available for in-person and online speaking engagements, private sleight-of-hand instruction, and a variety of media creation/production services. Houston can be contacted directly at stacked@kards.com

Michael Addamo had a huge chip lead on the money bubble that he lost in a massive pot with aces and nines against a better two pair. This time around it was Addamo who won a decisive hand with two pair against an inferior two pair to eliminate 2017 Super High Roller Bowl champion Christoph Vogelsang in third place and surge into the chip lead going into heads-up play. The hand began with Vogelsang raising from the button with A-4 off suit. Addamo defended his big blind with A-7 off suit and flopped top two pair. Addamo checked to Vogelsang, who made a continuation bet of around one-third the pot. Addamo defended with the likely hope of inflating the pot against some A-X holdings of Vogelsang. The German made the call and the A on the turn gave him aces and fours for an inferior two pair. Addamo kept on fiddling, betting just over two-third pot with his top two pair. Vogelsang would be left with around 5.2 million in his stack and nearly 7.7 million in the pot if he were to call. He decided to raise all-in instead, shoving for 7,409,740 total. Addamo made the call relatively quickly, having Vogelsang covered by just 328,240, or less than two big blinds. Vogelsang was unable to hit one of the two remaining fours in the deck and was knocked out in third place, earning $525,000 for his latest deep run in a high roller event. Addamo was able to convert the lead he earned by taking down this hand into the title, securing $1,310,715 after he defeated Florian Loehnert heads-up for the win. Loehnert was awarded $805,000 for his runner-up showing.

Strategies, Analysis & Commentary

TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2021 MILLIONS Online $100,000 No-Limit Hold’em Mega High Roller

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ANALYSIS

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Event Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAR.</td>
<td>Mar. 29-Apr. 25</td>
<td>DeepStack Extravaganza II</td>
<td>Venetian Hotel &amp; Casino • Las Vegas, NV</td>
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<td>APR.</td>
<td>Apr. 15-28</td>
<td>WPT Poker Showdown</td>
<td>Seminole Hard Rock Hotel &amp; Casino • Hollywood, FL</td>
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<td>APR.</td>
<td>Apr. 30-May 2</td>
<td>Trifecta Poker Series</td>
<td>bestbet Jacksonville • Jacksonville, FL</td>
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<td>MAY</td>
<td>May 14-16</td>
<td>South Dakota State Poker Championship</td>
<td>Silverado Franklin • Deadwood, SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>JUNE</td>
<td>June 2-13</td>
<td>Palm Beach Summer Classic</td>
<td>Palms Beach Kennel Club • West Palm Beach, FL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Arizona**

**Talking Stick Resort - Scottsdale**
- **M-F:** NLH, $125
- **Sa-Su:** NLH, $200

**California**

**Commerce Casino - Commerce**
- **M-F:** NLH, $125 AO $100
- **Sa:** NLH, $125

**Ocean's Eleven - Oceanside**
- **Daily:** NLH, $75 AO $5

**Florida**

**Bestbet - Jacksonville**
- **Mon:** NLH, $60
- **Wed:** NLH, $80
- **Fri:** NLH, $160
- **Sun:** NLH, $160

**Palm Beach Kennel Club - W. Palm Beach**
- **Mon:** NLH, $125 KO $25
- **Wed:** NLH, $125 KO $25
- **Thur:** NLH, $70
- **Fri:** NLH, $100
- **Sat:** NLH, $250 KO $50
- **Sun:** NLH, $100

**New York**

**Eastern Poker Tour**
- PUB POKER EVENTS, NEWS, RANKINGS AND UPDATES CAN BE VIEWED AT EASTERNPOKERTOUR.COM

**Maryland**

**Live! Casino & Hotel - Hanover**
- **Mon:** NLH, $120 KO $25
- **Tues:** NLH, $150
- **Wed:** NLH, $120
- **Thur:** NLH, $220
- **Fri:** NLH, $140
- **Sat:** NLH, $160 KO $50
- **Sun:** NLH, $320 KO $75
- **Mon:** PLO, $160 KO $50
- **Fri:** NLH, $320 KO $75
- **Sat:** NLH, $150
- **Sun:** NLH, $75 AO $5

**Maryland National Harbor - Oxon Hill**
- **Mon:** NLH, $140 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Tues:** NLH, $240 ($6K Guarantee)
- **Wed:** NLH, $165 KO $25 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Thur:** NLH, $320 KO $50
- **Fri:** NLH, $140 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Sat:** NLH, $240 ($5K Guarantee)
- **Mon:** NLH, $140 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Wed:** NLH, $140 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Thur:** NLH, $140 ($3.5K Guarantee)
- **Fri:** NLH, $360 ($25K Guarantee)

**Tejas**

**Celebrity Card Club - Galveston**
- **Wed:** NLH, $30 RB $20 ($500 Guarantee)
- **Thu:** NLH, $30 RB $20 ($500 Guarantee)
- **Fri:** NLH, $60 AO $50 AO $75

**Nevada**

**Sahara - Las Vegas**
- **Daily:** NLH, $55 RB $20 AO $20 ($500 Guarantee)
- **Fri:** H.O.R.S.E., $105 ($1K Guarantee)
- **Sat:** NLH, $100 RB $50 AO $50 ($3K Guarantee)

**Venetian Hotel & Casino - Las Vegas**
- **Mon:** NLH, $150 ($4K Guarantee)
WSOP MAIN EVENT WINNERS’ EARNINGS, EXCLUDING THEIR WSOP CHAMPIONSHIP TOP PRIZE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Player (Year)</th>
<th>Non-Main Event Payouts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Phil Hellmuth (1989)</td>
<td>$22.0 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Scotty Nguyen (1998)</td>
<td>$11.7 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Carlos Mortensen (2001)</td>
<td>$10.4 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Joseph McKeehen (2015)</td>
<td>$10.0 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Jonathan Duhamel (2010)</td>
<td>$9.0 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Chris Ferguson (2000)</td>
<td>$7.7 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Martin Jacobson (2014)</td>
<td>$7.0 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Ryan Riess (2013)</td>
<td>$6.8 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Johnny Chan (1987, 88)</td>
<td>$6.2 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Joe Cada (2009)</td>
<td>$5.6 Million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *World Series of Poker* main event has consistently been the largest poker tournament of the year with regards to total prize pool. The eventual champion has received a massive multi-million dollar payday for nearly two decades now. As a result, the upper echelon of poker’s all-time money list is densely populated with WSOP world champions. But among main event winners, who has done the best outside of their world championship title run?

Sitting atop this unique leaderboard is none other than 15-time bracelet winner Phil Hellmuth, with $22 million in career earnings to his name once the $755,000 he took home as the 1989 WSOP main event champion is deducted. That is nearly twice as much in earnings as his nearest competitor, Scotty Nguyen, who has cashed for $11.7 million outside of the $1 million he earned as the 1998 world champion.

The 2004 WSOP main event was the first to ever draw more than 1,000 entries, with poker’s popularity booming in the wake of Chris Moneymaker’s victory the prior year. From then on, the main event has always awarded a top prize of at least $5 million. The most successful main event champion from this modern era has been 2015 main event winner Joe McKeehen. The Pennsylvania native has cashed for just over $10 million in poker tournaments, discounting the $7,683,346 he secured in the big dance. He is the only player from this modern era to reach eight figures in earnings with his world championship score excluded. McKeehen has added to his total in the early months of 2021, cashing for $716,060 across two big final-table finishes.

McKeehen has also won two additional WSOP bracelets since his marquee victory, taking down the 2020 WSOP Online $3,200 buy-in no-limit hold’em event for $352,985 and the 2017 WSOP $10,000 limit hold’em championship for another $311,817. Joe Cada and Jonathan Duhamel are the only other main event winners from the post-Moneymaker era to win multiple bracelets after becoming a world champion. Cada has won three additional WSOP titles since his 2009 title run in the main event, while Duhamel has added two since his victory in 2010.
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